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On the Construction of Gender, Sex, and Sexualities

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“Sexy Babes! Live 1-on-1!” Perhaps you’ve seen the ads in newspapers and magazines, with their promise of “Hot Live Talk!” followed by a toll phone 900-number, “\$2.99 per minute,” and easily dismissed restrictions, such as “18+” or “Adults Only.” What ideas do these ads bring forward about sex, gender, and sexualities? One way to account for phone sex services is that they exist because men have powerful sex drives that must be satisfied even when a partner is not readily available. The 900-numbers provide an outlet for men’s innate needs. Another explanation might center on the idea that there are two kinds of women: good women who would never dream of earning money from “hot talk” with strangers, and bad women—sluts or whores—who do. Still another explanation might emphasize that sexual services for hire constitute exploitation of women. Perhaps the women who deliver such services are mentally disturbed, destitute, or drug abusers, and they take these degrading jobs out of desperation. Yet another account is that sex work is a job like any other job, and what people choose to do sexually is no one’s business but their own so long as no one is harmed. Women are free agents, and those who do phone sex must like it or they would not do it. Perhaps readers can think of still other ways of understanding why

some men pay for “hot talk” with “sexy babes,” and why some women provide this service.

Phone sex is only one of innumerable social phenomena that involve sex, gender, and sexuality. Phone sex raises many questions about gender and sexuality, and there are many ways a psychologist might study phone sex. Here, we use phone sex as a ready example to begin describing how social constructionists approach an object of study. Social constructionists would not seek the correct interpretation of phone sex, or the true motives of the male callers and the “sexy babes” who answer the phones. Nor would they hope to discover what men really get from a phone encounter. They might instead examine the range of interpretations of phone sex that have credence in the culture. Which representations of phone sex workers (e.g., “deluded victims” or “nymphomaniacs”) make sense to a community of listeners, and which (e.g., “wanton sinners”) do not? Social constructionists might also observe the social processes by which different explanations are put forward and warranted. How does it come about that certain accounts of phone sex come to be regarded as obvious or common sense? Social constructionists might also seek to understand how participating in phone sex (as a caller, as a “sexy babe,” or perhaps only as a reader of ads) shapes one’s ideas about sexual desire, male–female relations, and masculinity and femininity.

Social constructionism raises novel and intriguing questions about social phenomena related to sex, gender, and sexualities. The family of ideas and research tools associated with social constructionism provides a robust approach to understanding the social world and processes by which meanings are devised, validated, and contested. We begin with an overview of some important themes of social constructionism, then describe social constructionists’ work on gender, sex, and sexualities.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM: AN OVERVIEW

Social Constructionism Is a Theory of Knowledge

Social constructionists hold that what we take to be knowledge is an account of reality produced collaboratively by a community of knowers. Such accounts of reality arise through a process of social interchange and negotiation. Social constructionists are interested in the terms and forms in use among the members of a social group. How do people make use of those terms and forms to compose accounts that make sense to others in their social group? When, as social constructionists, we say that gender or sexuality is “socially constructed,” we do not mean that it is social rather than biological, learned rather than

innate, or the result of environment rather than heredity. Rather, we mean that the assumptions and linguistic constructs that enable people to talk and think about the phenomena are products of social negotiation and are therefore not universal or fixed. Thus, for example, in some social groups, it is common sense that people are straight, gay, or bisexual. However, this particular way of accounting for sexual practices—which entails a large set of implicit propositions about sexuality and identity—is only one of many possible accounts. It contrasts, for example, with accounts offered by queer and transgender activists (Parlee, 1998).

For social constructionists, concepts and categories are not direct, unequivocal, and unproblematic reflections of reality. Rather, what people consider to be reality takes its form and meaning from the concepts and categories available to them. Whether we construe the sale of phone sex as a necessary outlet for men, a job like any other, or a degrading and immoral practice, we draw on an array of constructs that precedes and shapes the story we tell: “male sex drive,” “slut,” “free choice,” “women as victims,” “false consciousness,” and perhaps even “decline of civilization.”

Knowledge Is a Social Product

For social constructionists, who emphasize the collective character of knowledge, knowledge is not the product of individual mental processes. Accounts of reality, as well as the concepts and categories that organize them, are specific to a particular time and place. Some researchers study the social and cultural codes that frame such accounts of reality. For example, double standards for the sexual behavior of women and men may be expressed in religious teachings, moral discourses, and media representations. They are also brought forward in everyday language, such as slang (“studs” vs. “sluts”) and proverbs (Crawford & Popp, 2003). In the recent past, teenage boys were encouraged to “sow their wild oats,” whereas girls were warned that a prospective husband “won’t buy the cow if he can get the milk for free.” Other researchers study the ways that conversation partners jointly construct an account of specific events. For example, Orenstein’s (1994) study of middle school students provided an anecdote in which male students construct and communicate sexual double standards under the eyes of a teacher in a sex education class. The teacher, Ms. Webster, was trying to illustrate the risk of sexually transmitted diseases:

“We’ll use a woman,” she says, drawing the Greek symbol for woman on the blackboard. “Let’s say she is infected, but she hasn’t really noticed yet, so she has sex with three men.”

As she draws symbols for men on the board, a heavyset boy in a Chicago Bulls cap stage whispers, "What a slut," and the class titters.

"Okay," says Ms. Webster, who doesn't hear the comment. "Now the first guy has three sexual encounters in six months." She turns to draw three more women's signs, her back to the class, and several of the boys point at themselves proudly, striking exaggerated macho poses.

"The second guy was very active, he had intercourse with five women." As she turns to the diagram again, two boys stand and take bows.

During the entire diagramming process, the girls in the class remain silent. (p. 61)

Accounts of reality, as well as concepts and categories, have histories. They arise in particular times and places, and change as circumstances and social realities change. This is true of both scientific and everyday concepts. Parlee (1994) has traced the struggles among doctors, social scientists, drug manufacturers, and feminist health activists over the meanings of the term *premenstrual syndrome* (PMS). At issue were its name and, more important, whether it was to be defined as a psychiatric condition, a gynecological disorder, or a normal variant of female functioning. As one might surmise, both money and power were at stake. Assembling the histories of concepts and constructs—genealogies of knowledge, as Foucault (1972) called them—is an important part of social constructionist scholarship. Such scholarship documents the invention of constructs, overt controversy over their meaning, and slippages and shifts in meaning over time.

Social Constructionists Attend to Power and Hierarchy

For social constructionists, power, along with its associated differences in status, entitlement, efficacy, and self-respect, is a central dimension of social life. Viewed from afar, power may appear entrenched. Yet power is not a fixed and invariant property of individuals; rather, it is a network of noncentralized forces. It is continually produced, contested, resisted, and subverted. By examining social interchanges in close detail, social constructionists document the micropolitics of subordination, dominance, and resistance. Furthermore, power is not limited to external forces that restrict, prohibit, and constrain people. Modern systems of power operate by heightening self-surveillance and self-control. Foucault, who referred to these systems of power as "technologies of the self," pointed out how individuals come to take pride and pleasure in the ways that they exert discipline and restraint over themselves. For example, because current North American norms of masculinity prescribe restricted emotionality for men, boys monitor their own and other boys' emotional displays in order to suppress them. In a study of white, subur-

ban teenage boys, Oransky and Marecek (2002) noted that the boys valued the ability to distance themselves from negative feelings, to be able to “take it like a man.” They also valued teasing and bullying, because such hostile interactions helped them to toughen up, to learn to “suck it up.”

Social constructionists’ insistence on the social character of knowledge opens the way to consider the politics of knowledge. Some accounts of reality become dominant discourses, assuming the status of truth or common sense; others remain muted or unavailable. What are the interactional processes by which some accounts get shunted off to the side, whereas others prevail? Whose accounts are authorized and supported? Whose accounts are marginalized and subjugated? By connecting the circulation of power in immediate interpersonal encounters to the larger culture, social constructionists hope to offer an account of how particular language practices and discourses gain their meaning and potency.

Language Makes a Difference

To use language is to participate in culture. To speak intelligibly is to make use of the linguistic genres available within the culture. It is to participate in a system that is already constituted (Gergen, 1985). In this way, language precedes and outlives an individual. The classifications and categories provided by language establish distinctions that “make a difference.” Such classifications guide our actions and carry implications for how we should evaluate and react to individuals or events (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990). They also, of course, regulate our own actions. Such classification systems are power-laden in the sense that they often create hierarchies of value, prestige, morality, and authority (good vs. evil, beautiful vs. ugly, smart vs. dumb).

Language is a representation of reality, not a direct replica of it. Concepts and categories embed shared, culture-specific meanings. For example, categories such as “gay,” “straight,” and “bisexual” embed a particular account of sexual desire. They are more or less discrete classifications that are relatively enduring. Moreover, they render sexual desire as a key aspect of personal identity. As we discuss, other accounts bring forward more fluid and expansive forms of desire. Moreover, in this category system, the sex of one’s partner is the key dimension of desire; other dimensions are rendered unimportant. This category system helps to establish homosexual and bisexual desire as different and “other,” thus shoring up the superiority and “normalcy” of heterosexuality.

Concepts and categories associated with gender, sex, and sexuality

work to regulate social behavior and identity. The concept of a male sex drive and its role in construing sexual encounters is one example. The construct of an implacable male urge for sex figures in accounts used by some men to pressure women to have sex with them (Hollway, 1989). It also figures in accounts that some women give to explain why they agreed to sex they did not want (Gavey, 1992). It has also figured in post hoc accounts that serve to excuse men and boys who have engaged in violent or coercive sex.

Social constructionists do not hold a determinist view of language. As practitioners of language, individuals can shift or undermine its meanings. For example, speakers may use irony, humor, and other linguistic and paralinguistic devices to subvert the dominant meanings of language (Crawford, 1995). In recent decades, homosexual activists have undermined the homophobic epithets “gay” and “queer” by reappropriating and investing them with positive meaning. Social constructionist research on language brings forward the paradox that people are enmeshed in a web of linguistic meanings, yet are able to use language in ways that resist or undermine established meanings.

In summary, to speak is to take part in culture, but individuals can put linguistic forms to novel and subversive uses. Moreover, communications among people not only convey messages but also make claims about who the speakers are relative to one another, and about the nature of their relationships. Relations of power are negotiated through the medium of language (Crawford, 1995; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Thus, language is an activity with practical, material consequences.

Social Constructionism Focuses on Processes

From a social constructionist perspective, meanings are not fixed, but are instead always emergent in human interactions. (This is what constructionists mean when they say that meanings are “co-constructed.”) Moreover, people do not passively imbibe cultural messages without awareness, nor do they simply parrot cultural discourses unreflectively. Social constructionists examine the social activities, language practices, and other social processes through which people account for themselves as gendered and sexed actors. They expect that people will not sustain coherent and unchanging accounts of themselves. Social constructionists often are specifically interested in how people shift among different accounts as they move through differing situations and relationships. The ongoing production of meanings is part of the flow of social life. People produce meanings of gender, sex, and sexualities that are provisional, contingent, and specific to particular settings. Therefore, social constructionists do not attempt to assert universally applicable or enduring

claims about gender, sex, or sexual orientation. This sets social constructionist accounts of gender and sexuality apart from those of theoretical approaches such as evolutionary psychology. Moreover, social constructionists are skeptical of technologies, such as scales or inventories, that attempt to measure masculinity and femininity as enduring personal qualities.

Individual and Society Are Indissoluble

The Western philosophical tradition of liberal humanism views the self as bounded and separate from society (cf. Henriques, 1998). In this view, social life is the context that surrounds individuals and influences their thoughts and actions. Social constructionists, in contrast, construe the individual and society as mutually constitutive. Berger and Luckmann (1966) express this as a paradoxical trilogy of statements:

Society is a human product.
Society is an objective reality.
Man is a social product. (p. 61)

Social constructionists favor terms such as *culture-in-mind* or *social mind* to describe the indissolubility of psyche and culture. Many prefer not to use the term *self*, because it signifies an independent and unitary entity. Instead, some speak about subjectivity. Others view people as taking up different subject positions as they move through various settings. Cole's (1996) definition of context is akin to the social constructionist view:

In seeking uses of the term *context* which avoid the pitfalls of context as that which surrounds, I have found it useful to return to the Latin root of the term, *contextere*, which means "to weave together." A similar sense is given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which refers to context as the connected whole that gives coherence to its parts. (p. 135)

Social Constructionists Look at Phone Sex

Let us return to the phenomenon of phone sex to illuminate some of the ideas introduced in our overview. We draw on the interviews with phone sex workers conducted by Hall (1995). Interviewees said that they consciously strove to create themselves as the fantasy women their clients desired by manipulating their language. As sellers of a commodity, the workers were aware of the kind of women's language that is marketable as "sexy talk." They created sexy talk by using feminine or flowery

words, inviting comments, and a dynamic intonation pattern (breathy, excited, varied in pitch, lilting). In North American culture, listeners often interpret these features of language as submissive or powerless (Lakoff, 1975). However, the workers on the fantasy lines did not feel powerless; they generally felt quite superior to their male callers, whom they characterized as unintelligent and socially inept.

Hall's study of phone sex illustrates a number of social constructionist themes. First, meaning is co-constructed through linguistic practice. The callers and the workers shared particular ideas of what constituted "sexiness." Workers drew on this shared cultural knowledge to present themselves as "sexy babes." Second, the phone conversations not only reproduced gendered power relations but also complicated and resisted such relations. On the fantasy lines, sex workers made deliberate use of feminine talk. Such talk is usually heard as submissive and powerless, but phone workers used it as a resource to exert some power. They enticed callers to part with their money. Perhaps they also exercised some control over callers' sexual arousal and, in that way, were able to prolong the time spent on the phone, thus earning more money. Third, the phone sex workers constructed accounts of social reality that enabled them to feel superior to their clients and effective in their jobs. They viewed their customers as inept. By their own accounts, phone workers' jobs had a number of advantages. The workers exercised some creativity as they generated characters and scripts. They earned a lot of money and had low overhead (e.g., they did not need expensive clothing, and they could work from home). And they could play at sex anonymously and at a distance, with no risk of violence, sexually transmitted diseases, or social sanctions. However, although individual workers gain some power, phone sex does not enhance the status or power of women collectively.

Hall's study invites still further constructionist questions. To the male callers, the fantasy woman constructed entirely through language was presumably satisfying. Callers paid well for the service, and many requested the same worker on repeat calls. But what accounts might callers offer of their own motives and behavior? How do they classify the women on the other end of the line? Whose accounts of phone sex and of phone sex workers are more likely to be heard, those of the callers or the workers? Furthermore, phone sex illustrates the constructionist contention that gender arrangements and categories are historically and culturally situated. Phone sex did not exist in the United States until recently, and it is absent in many other societies. Indeed, even the term *phone sex* is a recent coinage, and not every English speaker is privy to its meaning. Does the visibility of phone sex—even to those who do not participate in it—shift ideas about and evaluations of sex (perhaps especially masturbation)? Do phone sex, Internet sex, and other forms of

anonymous, distanced sexual encounters undermine the link between emotional intimacy and sexuality (a linkage that, at least in our time and place, has been especially important to women)?

Finally, the phone sex study challenged several categories and constructs often used in producing accounts of sexual relationships. For example, one of the most successful phone sex workers was a man who impersonated a woman. Clearly, this man was adept in performing linguistic femininity. How can we account for his performance and the satisfaction he provided to male callers? Is he a stud? Is he a slut? Are the sexual encounters in which he engages homosexual ones? Heterosexual ones? Such categories cannot easily stretch to encompass a sexual encounter between two men, in which one poses as a woman and the other falsely believes his partner is a woman.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GENDER

Feminists adopted the term *gender* in the late 1970s to distinguish between biological mechanisms and the social aspects of maleness and femaleness. Unger, who introduced this formulation to mainstream psychology in 1979, defined gender as “those characteristics and traits socio-culturally considered appropriate to males and females,” which she termed *masculinity* and *femininity* (p. 1085). In this formulation, sex is to gender as nature is to nurture; that is, sex pertains to what is biological or natural, whereas gender pertains to what is learned or cultural. The sex–gender dichotomy enabled psychologists to examine constructs such as sex roles, sex role socialization, and cultural norms of masculinity and femininity. The dichotomy is now commonplace in mainstream psychology. Indeed, it has been the basis for much psychological research intended to determine what is learned and what is inherent; what is malleable and what is not. An example is research on the femininity, masculinity, and sexual orientation of people with variations in hormonal or chromosomal components of biological sex. It has also fueled political and moral debates about what is natural and proper for each sex.

Social constructionists proceed from different formulations of both sex and gender. They reject the definition of gender as individual-level characteristics and traits set in place by social imperatives and cultural conditioning. They also question the idea that sex is the biological bedrock and gender is a mere cultural overlay. More specifically, social constructionists question the following aspects of the conventional sex–gender model: (1) the idea of gender as a property of individuals; (2) the idea of

gender as static and enduring aspects of individuals; (3) the formulation of sex and gender as a dichotomy; and (4) the claim that biological sex is a bedrock that stands apart from and untouched by language and culture. Social constructionists take a dynamic approach to gender. Rather than regarding gender as individual personality or trait differences, they construe gender as a social process—the shared labor through which we are continually producing one another as male or female people. The phrase “doing gender” reflects the social constructionist view. As West and Zimmerman (1987) say,

The “doing” of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production. Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures.” . . . Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society. (p. 380)

Social constructionists also have a distinctive conception of biological sex. They do not take sex to be the immutable bedrock that precedes gender and remains after gender is stripped away. They do not regard sex, biology, and bodies as ahistorical and prediscursive “givens.” What any cultural group takes to be natural does not reside outside the realm of interpretation and language. What are taken as biological facts are actually situated understandings lodged within webs of assumptions that shift from one cultural setting to another, from one epoch to another, and from perhaps from one subgroup to another within the same culture (e.g., Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Laqueur, 1990). Social constructionists set themselves the task of investigating the cultural meanings of bodies, biological processes, and embodied practices. In the next section, we show how a social constructionist approach offers new and generative ways to think about gender, sex, and sexuality.

THE PRODUCTION OF GENDER IN SOCIAL LIFE

Performing Gender

We begin by focusing on the individual and how he or she might enact gender in accord with the codes of his or her cultural surround. Let us return to phone sex to consider the gender performances that take place there. The phone lines are sites where shared ideas about women’s language are

overtly manipulated. The sex worker never meets the caller and knows nothing about him, yet she (or he) must convince him that she (or he) is a “hot babe,” ready and willing to enjoy fantasy sex with him. Because the telephone as a medium does not allow for visual stimulation, the fantasy must be created in words alone. To create the illusion, Hall’s (1995) phone workers drew on the idioms of pornography. Training manuals for the job told them to create stereotypical characters—bimbo, nymphomaniac, mistress, slave, lesbian, virgin. They were also instructed to be “bubbly, sexy, interesting, and interested” (pp. 190–191).

Another example of gender enactment comes from an early social constructionist project that examined how male-to-female transsexual individuals “pass” as a gender inconsistent with their biological sex.¹ Drawing on interviews, Kessler and McKenna (1978) showed the importance of speech style—vocabulary, intonation, and other pragmatic aspects. In addition, transsexual individuals self-consciously mimicked and practiced feminine modes of walking, standing, sitting, and gesturing. Cameron (1996) has nicely summarized the constructionist view of gender as a social performance:

If I talk like a woman this is not just the inevitable outcome of the fact that I am a woman; it is one way I have of becoming a woman, producing myself *as* one. There is no such thing as “being a woman” outside the various practices that define womanhood for my culture—practices ranging from the sort of work I do to my sexual preferences to the clothes I wear to the way I use language. (p. 46)

Of course, gender performances are not limited to femininity. Indeed, femaleness and femininity can be enacted only in contrast to maleness and masculinity. For gender to remain a social classification system of some import, there must be people who enact masculinity. In a study of male U.S. college students’ conversation while watching a televised basketball game, Cameron (1997) noted that, in addition to sports talk, the young men talked about daily events—going to classes, shopping for food—and their sexual exploits with women. (The male student who collected the data summarized their talk as “wine, women, and sports.”) Another important topic was gossip about other (despised) men, whom they called “gay.” Cameron interpreted such gossip as a way for the students to display their own heterosexual masculinity. These men distin-

¹ In 1978, when Kessler and McKenna wrote *Gender*, the term *transsexual* was standard usage to refer to people whose psychological gender identity was incongruent with their biological sex assignment, and who attempted to change the latter through hormonal treatment, surgery, or behavioral “passing.”

guished themselves from “unmasculine” men by denigrating those men as “artsy-fartsy fags” and “homos.” Cameron noted that this kind of discursive strategy “is not only *about* masculinity, it is a sustained performance of masculinity” (p. 590).

People have strong investments in particular ways of doing gender and in accounting for themselves as particular kinds of women or men. The basketball game viewers, for example, were invested in accounting for themselves not just as men but as *heterosexual* men. People may hold firm to certain accounts of themselves even when their behavior offers disconfirming evidence. In such cases, they may fabricate ingenious narratives that reconcile a preferred self-account with disconfirming behavior. For example, in a study of dating violence in young heterosexual couples, Parker (2002) found that some young women were adamant that they would not tolerate being hit by a boyfriend (“He hits me once and I’m out of there”). They were invested in constructing themselves as strong, autonomous, feminist women. When they were hit, they brought forward mitigating narratives that excused the violent incident as an exception (“He was drunk”; “He had a rough week”; “His family was giving him a lot of grief”). These narratives enabled a woman to remain in a relationship with a violent partner and still retain an image of herself as a strong woman who would not permit herself to be hit. Social constructionists take special interest in the discursive processes at hand to resolve such apparent contradictions. Focusing on these processes may shed light on the complex relationships among gender norms, gendered identities, and gender performances.

Cultural Repertoires of Gender

Members of a culture understand themselves and others through shared repertoires of meaning. Many social constructionists have studied aspects of everyday interactions that create and reaffirm gender difference, separateness, and hierarchy. To observe how gender is produced through joint social labor in everyday interactions, consider the talk of adolescent girls. Girls do many different things in talk. One of their most important accomplishments is to create and sustain friendships by sharing experiences and feelings in supportive ways. Girls also jointly construct their femininity: They enact what it is to be a girl in their particular community and culture. Coates (1996) recorded a conversation among four 16-year-old British girls about one girl as she tried on another girl’s makeup. In complimenting her (“Doesn’t she look really nice?”; “She does look nice”; “You should wear makeup more often”), they were being supportive friends. At the same time, however, they were drawing

on, and jointly reaffirming, a cultural repertoire in which looking good is very important, and working on one's appearance is expected and rewarded.

Another example is girls' use of the cultural repertoires concerned with body size and shape. In a study of high school girls in Arizona, Nichter (2000) examined adolescent girls' talk about their bodies. Regardless of their weight and body size, the white girls complained regularly about being too fat ("I'm so fat"; "Look at these thighs"; "I look terrible in this"). Nichter analyzed the social uses of this incessant "fat talk." Girls' complaints about their weight served many social purposes. For example, "fat talk" called for support and reassurance from friends ("No, you look great"). It expressed solidarity and rapport with others. For example, a thin girl might complain about being fat as a means of establishing her sameness with other girls and showing that she does not think she is better than they are. A declaration of being fat might also constitute an apology for indulging in "fattening" food and a means to ward off others' condemnation ("I know I shouldn't be eating this; I'm so fat"). Yet even as such "fat talk" lubricates the gears of girls' social life, the litany of complaints and rebuttals about fat, and the continual references to fat, reaffirm body size as a key dimension on which women and girls are judged.

Contemporary repertoires of gender serve both to maintain the boundaries and distinctions between men and women and to keep women subordinated to men. They often naturalize or conceal unequal power relations, injustice, and even violent coercion. For example, women's suppression of their own needs and interests to meet those of their spouses and children may be attributed to maternal instinct, an ethic of care, female relationality, or a biological predisposition to "tend and befriend." Such formulations locate the origins of such behaviors within the individual, not in the matrix of social relations. Moreover, they imply that the behaviors are natural (and perhaps inevitable) expressions of female nature.

Even at the level of grammatical structures, forms of talk may maintain gender difference and domination. For example, speakers and writers across a variety of settings tend to use passive-voice constructions and euphemisms that excuse or minimize men's culpability for violence against women. Rather than saying that a man raped a woman, one says, "She was raped," "A rape was committed," or even more euphemistically, "The incident occurred." Indeed, one study quoted a physician's report that stated, "Patient was hit in the face by a fist" (Phillips & Henderson, 1999). Such grammatical practices have been noted in medical and behavioral science writing, newspaper reports, accounts by convicted rapists, courtroom transcripts, and in the talk of experts on rape prevention (Crawford, 1995; Lamb, 1991).

The Production of Sexual Bodies

Social constructionists do not deny that genes, hormones, and brain physiology may have effects on behavior and morphology. However their interest lies in the accounts that people give about sexual bodies, the cultural meanings inscribed on the body, and the social implications of those meanings. Kessler (1998) studied intersexed children (i.e., children born with ambiguous genitalia), pediatricians, and parents. In the United States, it is standard medical practice to alter surgically an infant's genitals when they are deemed ambiguous. The procedures are difficult, painful, sometimes protracted, and may produce infertility or permanent loss of the capacity for sexual pleasure. The assignment of an intersexed infant to the category male or female, and the surgical interventions that follow, are based primarily on the size of the infant's phallic structure. The size difference between a medically acceptable penis and a medically acceptable clitoris is a mere 1½ centimeters—a difference that might not even be noticeable to laypeople. The purpose of “corrective” surgery is to create male and female genitals as unmistakably different structures. Surely, this is a radical example of social construction: The physical body is reconstructed to match what is considered to be the proper appearance of male or female anatomy.

The episode of the “Hottentot Venus” affords another example of how bodies are inscribed with social significance. The Hottentot Venus, a southern African woman given the name Saartjie Baartman, had genitals and buttocks that became the focus of overwhelming interest and curiosity in late 19th-century Europe. Baartman was described in the scientific literature of the day as having labia that reached her knees and abnormally large buttocks. European doctors, public health officials, and anthropologists regarded these physical characteristics as “primitive” and indicative of the uncontrolled sexual appetites of African women (Gilman, 1985). Baartman was crudely exhibited in the nude at scientific meetings, then as a public spectacle. She (and black African women in general) thus served as an example of moral degeneracy, a model of what a white woman was not and should not be (Hammonds, 1997). Claims about Baartman's primitive sexuality also bolstered Europeans' claims of the civilizing influence and moral “upliftment” brought to Africa by European imperialism. In the United States, claims of black women's hypersexuality entered into Reconstruction era debates about whether blacks in America were entitled to citizenship (Giddings, 1984).

Sex Categories

Thus far, we have reviewed constructionist explorations of the cultural meanings ascribed to anatomy. Now, we turn to a more fundamental

cultural construction, the sex categorization system itself. In contemporary Western societies, biological sex and sex category are conflated; that is, the agreed-upon criterion for classification as a member of one or the other sex is male or female external genitalia. Moreover, the idea of two, and only two, sex categories has achieved the status of biological, psychological, and moral certainty. Nonetheless, genitalia are usually not available for public inspection. In fact, the demonstrable existence of one or another kind of genitalia is actually irrelevant to the ascertainment of sex category in everyday life. People rely instead on insignias of sex (apparel, names, hair length) as proxies for the genitals that cannot be seen.

Social constructionists have challenged the commonsense idea that there can be only two sexes, as determined by genital dimorphism. They have pointed to social settings in which this does not hold. First, there are individuals who deliberately display a sexual insignia that is discordant with their genitals. These individuals range from some whose displays are relatively transitory—such as the male phone-sex worker who convinced callers that they were interacting with a woman—to others who “pass” for most of their lives. The Internet is a site where some people experiment with sex categories. Some chat room denizens manipulate sexual insignias (names, biographies, verbal style) to assume a sexual identity other than their off-line one. The motive may be playful experimentation, encouraged by the anonymity and distance that the Internet provides (Herrup, 2001). But the deception may also have less innocent goals. For example, a male psychiatrist posing as a woman named Joan initiated numerous on-line intimate relationships with women. His motive was a voyeuristic interest in “lesbian cybersex” (Van Gelder, 1985).

The conventional Western view that there can be only two sexes is not universally shared. For example, in India, *hijras* constitute a third sex category. It is not genitalia that determine whether one is a *hijra*. Some *hijras* are physical hermaphrodites, others have male genitalia, and still others were born with male genitalia but elected to undergo castration. *Hijras* adopt female names and wear women’s clothing. However, they do not attempt to pass as women. Their manner of displaying female insignias—heavy makeup; long, unbound hair; sexualized gestures—sets them apart from women in general and marks them as *hijras* (Nanda, 1990).

In Thailand, *kathoeys* represent a third sex. A *kathoe*y has male genitalia but dresses in women’s clothing. But a *kathoe*y is not a man who wishes to be (or become) a woman. Nor do *kathoeys* believe that they have “a woman’s mind” trapped inside the “wrong body” (an account that some American and European transsexuals give of them-

selves). According to Herdt, a *kathoey* “takes some pride in his male genitals” (1997, p. 149). Moreover, most *kathoeyes*, like most *hijras*, do not wish to pass unobtrusively as women. They behave and dress in dramatic, loud, brash ways that violate the norms of femininity in Thai culture, thus distinguishing them from women. Transgender and transsexual activists in the United States also maintain that it is possible to have more than two sex categories and that a sex category need not be defined by biological sex. The increasingly visible and vocal “trans” movement has put forward an abundance of sex categories: “FTM [Female-to-Male], MTF [Male-to-Female], eonist, invert, androgyne, butch, femme, Nellie, queen, third sex, hermaphrodite, tomboy, sissy, drag king, female impersonator, she-male, he-she, boy-dyke, girlfag, transsexual, transvestite, transgender, cross-dresser” (Stryker, 1998, p. 148).

“Trans” activism has produced not only a bumper crop of new gender–sex categories but also competing accounts of what they mean. The term *transsexual* once referred to someone in transition from one sex to the other. However, some who identify as transsexual or transgendered do not regard themselves as either “in between” one sex and another or “in transition” from one to another. Rather, they regard “trans” as another sex category (Bornstein, 1994; Elliot & Roen, 1998). Like *hijras* and *kathoeyes*, they do not wish to pass as men or women. Rather, they wish to make their crossing visible, to pose it as a counter to the dominant account that there are only two sexes. The alternate designation, *genderqueer*, which some prefer, makes this aspect of identity more salient. As Jeffrey Weeks (1995, p. 104) says, the intent is “to upset the dominant cultural codes and reveal their irrationality, partiality, and illegitimacy.” Indeed, the transgender movement can be seen as guerilla warfare against dominant constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality—dramatized enactments of social constructionism.

Sex, like gender, draws meaning from shifting cultural understandings and ever-changing social practices. Sex categorization is a matter of insignias and performances (as in on-line manipulations). These categorizations are culture-bound: Westerners, for example, often do not recognize *hijras* when they interact with them; to locals, however, *hijras* are unmistakable. In the United States, the rising visibility of trans individuals in popular culture, along with an increase in “trans” activism and political organizations, suggests that our system of sex categorization is destabilizing, shifting, and expanding.

The Construction of Sexuality

Humans engage in a variety of sexual and erotic practices whose meanings and morality vary across historical era and cultural context

(D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988). What is erotic and arousing in some cultures may be offensive and repellent in others. Romantic attraction to members of one's own sex category has different meanings worldwide. Sexual activity between people of the same sex (which may or may not involve romantic attraction or emotional intimacy) also has different meanings. For example, in many societies, sexual activity between young unmarried men is considered developmentally normal and appropriate. In some societies, adult-child sexual stimulation is considered appropriate. For the Sambia of New Guinea, for example, boy-insemination was a common practice until a few decades ago. Semen transfer from older male relatives to prepubescent boys was regarded as necessary to bring boys to mature manhood (Herdt, 1997). Although bodily pleasure may have been involved, the primary motive was familial obligation on the part of the adult partner. In summary, the meanings of same-sex activity and the values attached to it vary widely across cultures.

The meanings and values attached to same-sex activity within European and American societies have also varied widely across time. For example, in the 19th century, many women in North America had intense friendships, in which they spent weeks at each others' homes, slept in the same beds, and exchanged passionate and tender letters describing the joys of perfect love and the agonies of parting. Heterosexual marriage ended many of these relationships, but others endured over a lifetime. At the time, no one—including the individuals involved—labeled these women homosexuals or lesbians (Faderman, 1981; Smith-Rosenberg, 1975). Their relationships clearly involved romance, attachment, and physical intimacy, though we have no way of knowing how many involved genital contact. Were these women "really" lesbians? From a constructionist point of view, the answer is emphatically "no." Imputing the definitions, meanings, terms, and concerns of our day to the past is an error.

If our contemporary categories of sexual desire (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) do not carve nature at its joints, then what are their meanings? Let us look briefly at some recent definitions of the term *lesbian* by lesbian women:

... a woman who loves women, who chooses women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work creatively and independently, whether or not her relations with these women are sexual. (Cook, quoted in Golden, 1987, p. 20)

... a woman who has sexual and erotic-emotional ties primarily with women or who sees herself as centrally involved with a community of self-identified lesbians. (Ferguson, quoted in Golden, 1987, p. 21)

It is not having genital intercourse with a woman that is the criterion. There are lesbian women who have never had genital or any other form of sexual contact with a woman, while there are also women who have had sex with other women but who are not lesbian. (Lorde, quoted in Wekker, 1997, p. 18)

A further example is *political lesbians*, a term for women who choose to have relationships with women because heterosexual relationships constitute “sleeping with the enemy” (Kitzinger, 1987).

These varying definitions of the term *lesbian* have been a matter of lively dispute. Some lesbians regard political lesbians as inauthentic and set them apart from “true” lesbians. Others object to characterizations such as Lorde’s, because they downplay eroticism and sexuality in lesbians’ lives—in their view, a concession to the “nice girl” standards of traditional femininity. The category “lesbian” is a contested one, with multiple meanings related to erotic practices, choice of a sexual partner, emotional attachments, political commitments, and resistance to male dominance. Different individuals endorse different meanings, and the same individual might endorse different meanings at different times.

Researchers and clinicians often rely on the typology of heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual orientations to categorize and describe sexualities. But everyday understandings and practices concerned with sexual identity and sexualities are considerably more variegated, complex, and ambiguous. The term *sexual orientation* implies a deep-seated and enduring inclination. This way of accounting for sexuality is not universal; rather, it is specific to our time and place. The idea that one’s erotic attractions, sexual activities, or emotional attachments necessarily confer a social identity is similarly an account limited to particular cultural contexts. (In Sri Lanka, sexual activity between young men is common and unremarkable, but “homosexuality” is regarded as a vile and decadent product of the West.) Moreover, even in our own society, there is reason to question the notion of such enduring “orientations.” Diamond (2000), for example, found that among young women she interviewed, fully 50% of those who described themselves as lesbian or bisexual at the time of the first interview had changed their sexual identity (i.e., their self-described sexual predisposition) more than once by the time of a follow-up interview 2 years later. Golden (1987) found that a substantial portion of the college-age women she interviewed regarded their choice of sexuality as elective and, thus, open to change. Moreover, people’s accounts of their sexual identities (e.g., straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual) can be discordant with their sexual practices. For example, Bart (1993) found that many women who identified themselves as lesbians continued to do so even when they were involved in a sexual relation-

ship with a man. Similarly, some men identify themselves as heterosexual even though they have sex with both men and women. In other words, in everyday practice, the social category “lesbian” is not the same as “women who have sex with women,” and the social category “male homosexual” is not the same as “men who have sex with men.” Self-categorization (e.g., as straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual) and selection of a sexual partner are separable.

In some cultural groups in the United States, members hold alternative meanings of categories of sexual identity or use different categories altogether. In some Latino subcultures, the Spanish term equivalent to *homosexual* refers only to men who assume the passive, receiver role (coded as feminine) in sexual relations with men (Almaguer, 1991; Carrier, 1976). Also, some people identify themselves as bisexual to announce that they are attracted to people and not to gender categories. Others label themselves as *ambisexual*; they reject the term *bisexual* as inherently conservative, because it encodes the idea of two and only two sexes. Others adopt the term *spectrum person* to indicate that they see sexuality on a continuum and refuse to be pigeonholed into any category. Still others identify as *queer*, a term that does not refer to any particular sexual/erotic practice, but rather signifies a commitment to “dismantl[ing] the standardizing apparatus that organizes all manner of sexual practices into ‘facts’ of sexual identity” (Berlant & Freeman, 1993, p. 196).

These on-the-ground accounts of sexual identity and sexual practice are of great interest to social constructionists. It is in terms of these accounts that people live their lives, form identities, forge close relationships, and make judgments about others. Understanding the narratives of sexual lives and identities that flow from these accounts is a project with considerable practical import (e.g., for HIV/AIDS prevention programs). It is also a project for which constructionist research tools are ideally suited. Social constructionists are also concerned with the political implications of different typologies and category systems. For example, some people substitute the term *sexual preference* for *sexual orientation*; others reject that term on the grounds that it implies that one’s sexuality is chosen, thus supporting conservatives’ efforts to “reform” gay and lesbian people. Some use the term *affectional preference* to indicate that their relationships are not limited to sexual activity; others reject that term as glossing over physical desire and sexual acts, thus contributing to the continued invisibility of sexual diversity.

The proliferation of categories and meanings of sexual identities reflects contemporary grassroots resistance to authoritative pronouncements about sexuality. But, as is often the case, such resistance is double-

edged. On the positive side, it signifies emancipation from received categories and a refusal to live with stigmatized and pathologized identities. On the negative side, however, the destabilization of categorization schemes may inhibit social change. Without a collective identity, a marginalized group cannot easily mobilize for social change. If sexuality is socially constructed as unstable, fluctuating, and unmoored from identity, the movement for equal rights for sexual minorities could lose its core membership and its political purpose.

THE VALUE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

We have introduced social constructionism as a theory of knowledge and have discussed a variety of constructionist inquiries into gender, sex, and sexuality. We have suggested that it has opened important areas of investigation. Furthermore, it has served as the epistemological grounding for some new social movements related to sex and gender. We now consider in general terms the value of social constructionism for advancing the psychology of gender. We identify four areas of contributions that social constructionists have made thus far.

Pragmatic Empiricism

Constructionists' projects are often designed to yield knowledge that is of immediate practical use. Several projects we have described were born out of a commitment to social transformation; some incorporated an action component. External validity, often a scarce commodity in laboratory research, is a forte of constructionist inquiry. By investigating mundane activities and forms of talk in real-life locales, researchers come to grips with social reality in an intimate and firsthand way. The interventions that flow from these projects may be tailored to the specific situations and social groups that the researcher has investigated. Moreover, because researchers draw their constructs and categories directly from the lexicon of their research participants, their findings are more readily communicated to the communities from which the participants were drawn.

Social constructionists do not seek to make generalized claims about human behavior that transcend a particular time, place, and social group. Nonetheless, their projects may contribute to general knowledge. The constructs and themes emerging from a particular investigation may serve as sensitizing devices for subsequent investigations, action projects, or therapeutic interventions. More generally, by calling attention to what is taken for granted, social constructionists can bring into view

what was heretofore unseen. By “denaturalizing” what might have seemed natural and inevitable, social constructionists’ knowledge can make a space for political debate, and perhaps for social and political change.

Building Bridges to Other Disciplines and to Global Psychologies

In our view, social constructionism can be a bridge to other disciplines, psychologies, and intellectual movements. It has aspects in common with the influential intellectual movements grouped under the rubric postmodernism; thus, it can link psychology to disciplines such as cultural studies, feminist/gender studies, and critical theory. Social constructionism is also kin to rich and fruitful sociological and anthropological traditions such as symbolic interactionism, practice theories, and ethnomethodology (cf. Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). Social construction theory and practice may also serve to connect psychology in the United States to intellectual developments in the psychologies of the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Indeed, much of the research that we have cited was carried out in these countries.

Conceptual Innovation and Critique

Social constructionists study the meanings, category systems, and narrative logic of the conceptual worlds that people inhabit. Understanding these conceptual worlds is crucial to understanding how people explain themselves and others, and how they justify and interpret various forms of conduct. In many cases, these everyday construals do not map closely onto formal scientific categories (e.g., recall the plethora of emerging categories designating alternative genders and categories of sexuality).

Social constructionists have also turned attention to the scientific categories and constructs used by psychologists. They have investigated how cultural ideologies, social forces, and historical events shape these categories and constructs, as well as the production of knowledge in psychology more generally. They have also examined how psychological knowledge reaffirms certain cultural ideologies and justifies certain social practices by imbuing them with scientific legitimacy. Feminist social constructionists have been critical of a variety of constructs and categories pertaining to gender and sexuality. For instance, they have challenged the ontological status of categories such as

female masochism, male sex drive, PMS, and the human sexual response cycle.

For social constructionists, knowledge is always situated and partial; inevitably, it reflects the perspectives, position, and investments of the knower. For this reason, many constructionist researchers make themselves visible in their research reports by describing who they are and what political commitments they have. In this way, they engage readers in an inquiry into how researchers' subjectivity may have shaped the research process and its outcomes. Some researchers have experimented with innovative procedures designed to accommodate and make use of the partial and perspectival nature of knowledge. For example, to analyze open-ended narratives collected from gay men and lesbians, Russell (2000) assembled a team of five gay and straight people from diverse educational, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The team's prolonged discussion of divergent coding schemes was central to the interpretive work and to Russell's analytical stance. For a social constructionist, a researcher's standpoint influences not only the interpretation of the findings but also the choice of research questions, the way the questions are framed, and preferred methodological strategies for collecting data.

Critical Reflection on Psychology

Social constructionism invites critical reflection on knowledge-making practices. Such critical reflection goes beyond an evaluation of methodological adequacy to encompass value-based, ethical, and political concerns as well. These reflections start with the recognition that psychologists, like other members of the culture, cannot divorce themselves from the cultural surround or from its system of meanings. Categories of psychological knowledge are not *a priori* givens but are historically specific acts of meaning. Some investigations have excavated the history of psychological concepts (e.g., intelligence, development, self, and stress). These investigations also trace the social structures and practices that such scientific constructs served to justify. Other investigations concern the historical and sociological processes that have formed the discipline. For example, Morawski (1988) and others have investigated the rise of experimentation in North American psychology. Porter (1955) has probed the historical circumstances that led to the reliance on quantification and trust in statistics. Danziger (1977) has examined psychology's predilections for naming and measuring the mind. Such critical reflections can make the generation of knowledge more sophisticated

conceptually, empirically, and politically, no matter which methods of inquiry researchers use.

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